

Writing as Memory Work

Teaching the Civic Deliberations over Monument Removals

Jill Swiencicki¹ and Barbara J. Lowe²

¹St. John Fisher College (jswiencicki@sjfc.edu)

²St. John Fisher College (blowe@sjfc.edu)

Abstract

Social justice goals are usually sought in civic or community settings in which stakeholders represent competing frameworks about what is just, good, and true. Modeling for students a way to identify these competing frameworks, and then intervene in deliberations to achieve just ends, is the focus of our assignment sequence. We examine civic deliberations over removing racist public symbols in this assignment for first-year students enrolled in linked rhetoric and philosophy courses. We read broadly in theories of public memory and civic identity, examine in depth one community's deliberation, and reflect on public symbols in our home communities. The final joint assignment asks students to identify the principles that should guide deliberations about contested public symbols. We found that the assemblage of ideas that the students select from these pre-drafting activities shapes what they think is possible in the work of social justice; in other words, their own standpoint enables and limits what they see in the assemblage of ideas, sometimes limiting the arc of social justice insights and solutions, and sometimes unleashing it. For this reason, reflective writing is a necessary entwined process, one that can develop better awareness of how students' epistemic norms shape their ability to imagine social justice ends. To most fully realize social justice knowledge, students must not stay bound within the contours of particular deliberations or inward reflection. Instead, assignments must enlarge the context, asking students to make bigger inquiries into history, context, and relations of domination.

Course Context: A Monumental Moment

St. John Fisher, our small, liberal arts college, requires that first-year students fulfill their writing requirement across two linked courses that examine a single topic from different disciplinary perspectives. In this learning community, our 100-level rhetoric and philosophy courses examine how communities deliberate over a social justice problem: how they identify a problem to confront, the language and practices they use to confront it, the values and beliefs that undergird their aims, and the ways they respond to alternative and opposing stakeholders. We encourage students to use writing to discover social justice pathways through the thicket of the deliberative process. Indeed, much of social justice work occurs in a deliberative space of diverse interests, investments, and identifications. In the heterogeneous spaces of the school board, the town meeting, or the legislative session, participants hold different and competing orientations. As solutions to problems are proposed, those proposals inevitably disrupt and even threaten the identities, realities, and attachments of some stakeholders. Such is the ideologically diverse reality in which social justice aims are acknowledged and implemented.

We first conceived of this assignment in 2018 when we watched communities contest their racist public monuments in the wake of the murders in Charleston in 2015 and Charlottesville in 2017. We taught the assignment again in a less deliberative, more activist context of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020. In both iterations, our students were in overwhelming solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives (BLM). This surprised us, as our students are

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predominantly white, often coming from rural and suburban areas within 200 miles of campus (S. Lederman, director of freshman admissions, St. John Fisher College, personal communication, September 21, 2021). By 2020, the solidarity these students felt shifted from the safety of class discussions and college essays, to acts of public visibility, as they blacked out their Instagram feeds, attended BLM protests, wore BLM-themed t-shirts and masks on campus, and publicly called out the white supremacist and racist assumptions of peers and family members. Students were eager to engage in the question of how to stay oriented to social justice outcomes within a contested, deliberative space.

Halfway into the semester, we combine our classes and introduce a joint assignment that asks students to “identify what principles you think could help guide the conversations that communities have about their contested public symbols.” We scaffold this assignment by examining a community deliberation over a contested mural; engage in critical reflection on contested spaces in their home communities; and apply readings on racism, identity, and public memory drawing from the fields of cultural rhetoric and feminist pragmatist philosophy. Tracking the spectrum of ideological affiliations at play is complicated. To help with tracking, this assignment sequence emphasizes the use of graphic organizers in identifying and summarizing ideological affiliations, which helps students compare and synthesize ideas from course readings. Such a method uses writing for the transfer of social justice knowledge and offers students a new way to identify, listen, and self-reflect on their own antiracist stance.

The Learning Community Course Structure

In the learning community, students examine a complex social problem from two different disciplines. The comparison helps students see how disciplines and standpoints shape what we see as a problem and forms our methods for negotiating difference. The two disciplinary perspectives also highlight how we identify and address our blind spots, and what we see as action and a just remedy. Together the courses ask: how can a philosophical tradition help us consider the ways that identity, the self, and power converge in civic deliberations? How can a rhetorical tradition help us explore the ways discourse reflects ideological affiliations and also offer imaginative ways to remake social relations? How might our assessment of these conflicts be more complicated than a binary between justice and injustice? Rather, how can we unearth skills, practices, and processes to gain awareness of epistemic entrenchment—of others and our own—and consider a more just world?

By mid-semester, these separate areas of study converge to meet our cultural moment, addressing instances of murder and violence against African-Americans, and reckoning with events that include reconsidering racist public murals, monuments, and flags. We begin our shared course meetings with readings about public symbols that help us understand space and temporality. Political geographer Karen Till (2012) coined the term “wounded cities” to describe how forms of violence may appear sudden and discrete, like the Charleston massacre, but that in truth, work over a period of many years, “and continue to structure current social and spatial relations, and as such structure expectations of what is considered ‘normal’” (p. 6). She notes how residents are wounded by state and dominant social-political practices and seek to transform structures of inequality and recognize people’s lived realities within public settings (p. 5). Till describes civic wounds as “complex temporalities” of trauma, history, and material devastation, sustained through “intergenerational relations and silences” (p. 6). Political geographers Joshua F.J. Inwood and Derek Alderman (2016) contend that these wounds cannot simply be erased by removing their public symbol avatars; they describe this as historical and geographical erasure with the goal of forgetting the past and moving forward without doing the reparative work that truly moving forward requires (p. 11). Reading Till and Alderman immerses students in a new

notion of civic time and civic responsiveness within it.

Communities working to heal wounded spaces must engage in what Till (2012) calls “memory work” to care for the wounds that structure their relations, taking “responsibility for the failures of the democratic state and its violences” as they work to “imagine more socially just cities through place-based practices of care” (p. 7). Such work is a “reaching out toward something other than the self” (p. 8) in ways that “build self-worth, collective security, and social capacity” (p. 7). Christina Sharpe (2016) posits the term “wake work” as engaging in modes of artistic production, resistance, consciousness, and possibility for living amidst ongoing racial trauma (p. 11). Wake work is an analytical, poetic concept that connects the legacy of enslavement with ongoing structural racism. Students read about it as a mode of “inhabiting and rupturing” instead of enduring state violence and surviving subjection (p. 13). Memory work and wake work help students identify slavery’s past in the current acts of injustice of the present (p. 18). The work of Erin Genia (MAPC Metro Boston, 2020) (of Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota ancestry) asks us to reconsider the category of public space altogether, moving students from our settler-colonial assumptions to examples of decolonizing space and place with our memorial acts. We examine Genia’s (2019) Dakota pride banner “Resilience” for an example of how public art can inhabit and rupture public space, can call up a history of structural racism, and imagine just relations.

Analyzing Civic Deliberation

Our joint class sessions apply our readings to consider a controversy that had been ongoing since the 1960s but came to formal, deliberative process in 2019: whether the mural, “Life of George Washington,” should be removed from the San Francisco high school that bears his name (Lam, 2019; Pogash, 2019). The mural was painted by artist and member of the Communist party, Victor Arnautoff, as part of the Depression-era public works project in 1935, and is one of the fourteen murals that line the entryway and first floor of the school (Lam, 2019). The mural was a point of discussion in two ways. We worked closely with artifacts written by the major stakeholders in this deliberation: interviews with current and former students of the school (Asimov, 2019; Moyer, 2019), Indigenous leaders, historians and artists, and elected school board members. We watched videotape from the open comment periods of the school board meetings, read open letters produced by art historians (“Open Letter on the Proposed Destruction of a Mural Cycle,” 2019), and worked with a variety of other texts to understand people’s assumptions, attachments, wounds, and joys surrounding the mural (“San Francisco Mural Controversy,” 2019).

The case deliberation offered students a point of departure to research the public symbols in their home communities. We asked students to do a bit of internet digging, talk with family and friends, and write a short description of a contested symbol and any deliberative process and outcome, as well as their reactions and opinions. A student from Toronto, for example, wrote about a main thoroughfare in his neighborhood: Dundas Street. Henry Dundas, a nineteenth-century Canadian MP, sponsored legislation that extended the transatlantic slave trade in Canada, and the recognition of this history in the wake of the George Floyd killing prompted a 2020 effort to change that street name. The student, a white settler Canadian, was adamant that the street name be changed. Another student examined the controversy over the Columbus Circle area in her hometown of Syracuse, New York, where Italian Americans and Indigenous groups—who used to be at an impasse over removal of the Columbus Statue—are now finding common ground. From high school mascot changes to the persistence of the Confederate flag in rural western New York, students identified controversies in their localities and explored the ways place is signified, and identities are developed around and against places.

Making Meaning with Graphic Organizers

Prewriting for the essay includes graphic organizers (charts that serve to compare articles) and provide scaffolding for the project. First, students charted the philosophical and rhetorical arguments the cases discussed. (See Figure 1.) Over the span of a week, students completed the chart in small groups. Having already studied the feminist, pragmatist, and antiracist visions of Jane Addams (1902/2002), George Herbert Mead (1934/1972), María Lugones (2003)(1989/2003), and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018) in their philosophy course, students considered how the social nature of the self and individual and community (tribal) identities impact their ability to imagine inclusive and creative solutions to community-based conflicts. Students also consider how they are (or are not) present with and to others in their communities.

A second, collaborative charting activity used the analytical tools from the rhetoric course. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch (2016) note that symbolic action is “expressive human action, the rhetorical mobilization of symbols to act in the world” (p. 7). In focusing on symbolic action, we analyzed the words and images deployed by each stakeholder that represent their position on the mural. Bitzer’s (1968) notion of the rhetorical situation helped students identify the ways stakeholders expressed the timeliness of their arguments and adapted their message to appeal to different audiences. Kenneth Burke’s (1966) notion of terministic screens helped students see how words and images screen—or select—a given reality, but also repress, mute, and even erase competing realities to advance their claims. And Toulmin’s (1958/2003) methods of analysis allowed students to focus on the underlying assumptions of stakeholder claims that revealed their ideological allegiances. Through these rhetorical approaches students were able to find patterns in stakeholder uses of symbols and discovered quickly that, no matter what group was deliberating, and in what city, five positions emerged:

- (a) remove the symbol from public view;
- (b) remove it and place it in another, fuller educational context;
- (c) keep the symbol but add a fuller context;
- (d) keep the symbol as is; or
- (e) create new art in the spirit of antiracist social relations.

Students created a chart that helped them track how predictable and competing stakeholder identities, opinions, beliefs, and values emerge and vie for dominance. (See Figure 2.)

The charting activities are tools of invention, a step toward the joint essay. They help students develop a stance they might need to tackle in the prompt, one that Maria Lugones (2003) refers to as the attenuated, one poised to “witness faithfully” by moving “with others without falling into a politics of the same . . . ; without mythologizing place; attempting to stand in the cracks and intersections of multiple histories of domination [and] resistances to dominations” (pp. 6-7). Through charting and the discussions it prompted, students would imaginatively explore the perspective of others and, thereby, entered into the complexity of these cases, gaining a sense of not only the possible just outcomes for each contested issue but, more holistically, a sense of the qualities of a just process, regardless of the situation. The charts allowed students to identify and put into words what perspectives might be underrepresented, or which ones align, or which ones erase and denigrate the assumptions underpinning other perspectives. This prewriting work requires students to confront their own assumptions. Students who initially assumed that a socially just solution was clear, perhaps insisting that the mural or statue be removed because of the depiction of slavery and the death of Indigenous people, found their understanding and their own views more complicated once they immersed themselves in a fuller understanding of histories, assumptions, and stakes. Our hope was that, even if the student retained their

original position, their understanding and reasoning for why they held it would become more complicated than what a binary, good/bad analysis might otherwise produce.

Supporting Student Work, Assessing the Assignment

Students begin with drafting the joint essay by synthesizing philosophical principles of social justice and comparing the rhetorical moves stakeholders make in deliberations on public symbols. Eventually they are ready to make a claim about what communities should keep in mind in such deliberations. Making the claim and supporting it involves a level of metacognitive awareness in which students are able to anticipate the positions that they will hear but not shrink them into caricatures or stereotypes. From this position, they are better able to carefully respond to the complexities of identity, understand how ideology entrenches roles, and make a series of rhetorical moves designed to achieve social justice outcomes. For example, students may write their essays as a series of questions, the aim of which is to address sedimented ruts in deliberative exchanges. They may write their essays in a procedural mode, setting up ways that stakeholders can engage in activities to promote sympathetic understanding, or their essays might be declarative and didactic, explaining how standpoint constructs knowledge and limits it. Each of these requires what George Herbert Mead (1934/1972) called “reflexivity,” what Jane Addams (1902/2002) called “working with,” and what Maria Lugones (2003) called “attenuated agency.” The point in all cases is to enter into the context of the situation where diverse perspectives might better be seen and engaged.

Students examine their charts to assemble perspectives, concepts, and proposals in order to determine what communities should keep in mind. By making these assemblages, students process social justice ideas through affiliation, allegiance, and amplification. The assemblage of concepts that the students select shapes what they think is possible in the work of social justice, enabling what they see and what remains invisible, sometimes limiting the arc of social justice insights and solutions, and sometimes unleashing them. Till (2012) offers helpful framing to understand the different conceptions of social justice our students offered. Till distinguishes between first generation rights, in which she includes individually focused rights like political rights, and second and third generation rights, in which she includes rights that might be seen as more communal in nature, like the right to peace among people and the right to a healthy environment (p. 8). Students with a more communal sense of social justice embraced second- and third-generation rights, and were more likely to draw on, for example, María Lugones’ (2003) idea that we are all “mapped” into our social environments and that our position on these maps is either with or without power. Students with “unleashed” notions of social justice wove this mapped understanding into their analysis, noting the importance of including, even privileging, voices that were without power on the shared map as central to achieving social justice. One student developed a theory of deliberation inspired by his idol Mohammed Ali and his adage “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” The student argued that advocates for social justice need to understand how to modulate rhetorical strategies to be heard, to influence, and to make an impact. Students tended to conceive of social justice as historically informed and communal in nature, fully embracing the social nature of the self explored in both of our courses.

Some students clung to a conception of human rights that tended to be more singular or individual in nature. These students did not seem to be as historically informed by the systematic nature of racism in our country, though this was a featured area of study in our learning community. Students with more limited, individually focused notions of social justice, failed to factor in the “asymmetries of power” that Lugones (2003) highlights, and instead tended to assemble their analysis by placing every voice on equal footing. Some even flipped the scales and pushed back against communal responses that may have privileged the historically silenced

voices, thus affirming individual rights considered in isolation and without consideration of long-standing, historical power relations, as well as structural racism and other forms of disenfranchisement. In her analysis of mayor Mitch Landrieu's (2018) description of his rationale for monument removals in New Orleans, one student insisted that, in the course of community deliberation, the white supremacist voice was not heard and therefore the process was flawed, ultimately being unjust to the white supremacists.

As Inwood and Alderman (2016) point out, there is a tendency in deliberations to want to “address symbols of a racist heritage without challenging the foundational histories and geographies of racism” (p. 10) and therefore there is a “cordoning off of the degree to which white supremacy might be challenged” (p. 183). These students who resist the arc of social justice as communal in nature are reluctant to center social justice wounds in the historical facts of slavery. Such an act of memory politics is an attempt to:

‘Fix’ time and identity by deploying the material and symbolic qualities ... to close off public discussion by bounding time through place while others seek to keep open the process of historical reflection through dialogue, changing landscape forms, and community capacity-building. (p. 7).

Going forward, it will be important to spend more time on the rhetorical features of memory politics, as students learn to identify such deliberative moves, as well as the underlying assumptions they carry, deepening their understanding of the barriers and opportunities for achieving social justice. They must do this not only in reference to the stakeholders in the cases they are analyzing, but also by reflecting on their own ideological predilections.

Through additional metacognitive work, we must offer students opportunities to gain awareness of their own positionality and preconceived ideologies. We hope that this work helps students come to see how their own positionality may have influenced what they could see, what they could not see, and how they may have weighed and filtered the information they assembled. While we offered this opportunity at the beginning and end of the assignment sequence, we did not sufficiently thread in formal moments for reflection throughout the process. Without metacognitive work, the well-meaning, yet relatively privileged, student body at our institution was not likely to fully realize the power and privilege dynamics that inform the cases we examined.

This assignment reveals many hard truths about social justice work. Social justice outcomes are some of the most difficult to achieve because they involve the ceding of entrenched power and systemic, structural shifts toward inclusion that require support, education, and care for all those involved. Socially just insights and outcomes are usually not achieved by fiat, in a single, unanimous decision that left all those involved feeling equally heard. They are usually hard-won through processes and practices that involve the (re)creation of individual and community identities, that include previously silenced voices, and that lead to the creation of new and shared meanings and values. Social justice work thus involves not only attention to outcomes but also to methods, processes and identity-building. As Till (2012) argues, human lives “move, interact and engage with others through complex temporal and spatial pathways” and, as they do so, “the symbolic and material places they make also become part of their bodies-selves-environments” (p. 6). Thus, the “social” in social justice work is not only the work of striving for just outcomes; it is identity, relationship, and emotional work as well. If successful, such work will create “normative anchors” in communal deliberations that encourage the seeking of broader, intergenerational rights and justice (p. 8). Participating in such deliberations can lead one to see the social webs and historical ecologies that such symbols are part of, from red-lining, to failed urban renewal and planning, and entrenched segregation (p. 9). An important insight

for teaching is that our assignments must develop sympathetic understanding—in ourselves and in others.

ASSIGNMENT

Teaching the Civic Deliberations over Monument Removals

Joint Essay Assignment

Joint Essay: 1500 words, MLA format, Works Cited. Two peer workshops required. One group draft conference with Dr. Lowe or Dr. Swiencicki.

The purpose of this assignment

Should a confederate monument be displayed in a city park? Should a college dormitory be named after its donor who was a slaveholder? These are questions that communities across the U.S. are asking of themselves. Such questions get at the heart of how we understand our past, how we represent it in the present, and how we use symbols to assert our communal beliefs, values, history, and aspirations.

For this essay, please identify what principles might help guide the conversations that communities have about their contested public symbols. To do this, use the readings from both our first-year learning community courses (rhetoric and philosophy), as well as the cases we have studied of cities that have made decisions about their public monuments, murals, and street names.

The learning goal

This assignment helps you recognize, assess, and respond to the multiple standpoints that make up a given social justice problem. Social justice outcomes are often achieved by participating in tough deliberations in which competing outcomes are at play. When community members deliberate about what to do with, for example, a confederate monument in their town square, they each do so with different assumptions about what is good, true, and just for their community. Learning to identify these underlying value assumptions can help you understand how ideas align and prevail, or diverge and lose force. They help us see places of incommensurability in deliberation, or when points of comparison and compromise are not yet possible. And they help us see where to direct our energy in building bridges among differing perspectives toward the goals of equity, inclusion. Understanding the perspectival nature of reality means we can become more aware, ethical users of language, and work more intentionally toward social justice.

Why you are prepared to do this

Your training in our two, linked courses (rhetoric and philosophy) prepares you to identify and examine social justice actions. In our rhetoric class, you have been studying the ways that symbols (words, images and artifacts) reflect and create beliefs and values, and are representative of larger ideologies. In our philosophy class you have been studying the work of American pragmatist, feminist, and progressive thinkers who engage questions of social justice relating to structural inequality, power and privilege, and potentials for identification and empathy across differences.

Your audience

The audience for this essay is your learning community professors and classmates. Assume that we have read all the relevant sources on your Works Cited page. Use “I” in your essay and draw on relevant classroom discussions, your analysis of the charts, and the theories we have read to

support your argument.

Your essay will be evaluated on how well it...

Identifies what communities might consider when deliberating about their contested public symbols; supports those claims with analysis of the language and ideologies of stakeholder perspectives from the rhetoric class; supports those claims with theories from your philosophy course; reflects on what you have learned about your own ethical investments in these issues; and organizes and connects the above elements, and attends to the style and craft of writing.

Scaffolding Activities Building to Joint Essay

1) Gateway Activity: “The Life of Washington” Mural

This mural is titled “The Life of Washington,” (see one of the thirteen panels of the mural below) and it hangs in the front hallway of the George Washington High School in San Francisco, CA.

(Editor note: The image used in the author’s assignment is not included here as Prompt does not have a copyright license to it, and it’s not clear that the use here would be a fair use under U.S. Copyright law. Detailed images of the mural, and in particular, the image the authors included in the assignment, are available in Cherny (2019).)

It was painted by artist and member of the Communist party, Victor Arnautoff, as part of the Depression-era public works project in 1935, and is one of thirteen other murals that line the entryway and first floor of the school. In small groups, study and discuss this mural using some of the following questions:

§ Did your town, school, or neighborhood have controversial public symbols? What did you learn from observing or participating in discussions about them? How were conflicts resolved? Were the outcomes socially just, in your view?

§ What argument does the mural seem to be making about Washington? About power and nation-building?

§ Imagine how different groups in the community would experience this mural. Brainstorm a list of groups and imagine their arguments about this mural, and where those arguments come from.

§ We will watch two, 10-minute news segments which feature the school board’s decision to remove these murals, and we will discuss whose perspectives prevailed in the deliberations.

§ What in your personal experience informs your feelings about what should be done, if anything, with this mural?

§ Is it socially just to allow “Life of Washington” to remain? What research would you need to do to be able to answer that question?

2) Charting Philosophical & Rhetorical Perspectives

See Figure 1 for the chart students use to identify concepts. It is shown in its correct size and context in the original assignment description (see [Supplementary Materials](#)).

3) Charting Diverse Perspectives

See Figure 2 for the chart students use to identify perspectives. It is shown in its correct size and context in the original assignment description (see [Supplementary Materials](#)).

Charting Social Justice Concepts					
	Key words, phrases, and concepts that help us think about public memory and racism	Define key words, phrases and concepts	Quotes that support the definitions offered (Include page numbers)	Implications of these concepts for understanding social justice and public memory	Apply these insights to one of our cases to help assess the deliberations
ERIN GENIA					
JANE ADDAMS					
CHRISTINA SHARPE					
GEORGE HERBERT MEAD					
MARIA LUGONES					

Figure 1. Chart students use to identify concepts.

4) In-class brainstorm activity: Identifying your conclusions and observations

We have examined how San Francisco’s George Washington High School community has grappled with their controversial mural. We have also briefly examined cases from your home town, and elsewhere in the U.S. (New Orleans, LA, and Charlotte, SC). This is a case study method, where we examine how a similar problem is deliberated across different contexts. It helps us compare and contrast perspectives within each case, and then compare those perspectives and outcomes across different cases. We can then recognize patterns in deliberations that stall social justice outcomes, as well as discussions, practices, and arguments that develop and create social justice outcomes.

We have worked in small groups and completed presentations on two charts—one that helps us compare the rhetoric of different perspectives on monument removal, and one that uses feminist pragmatist and antiracist philosophies to assess different perspectives on monument removal. Examine these charts and see what patterns, insights, and trends emerge in the ways different perspectives approach the issue of racism and public symbols. What lessons can we learn from the patterns, trends, and insights you have charted?

Your charts will likely reveal your sympathies: With which perspective do you align yourself?

Charting Diverse Perspectives				
Prevailing Perspectives (Driving question?)	Symbolic Action	Rhetoric	Ideology	Value
What should be done with public symbols that have a racist past?	What do those who take up this position think about the connection between symbols and community identity? (Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)	What words and phrases do they use to represent their position? What persuasive strategies do they employ? (Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)	What are the prevailing ideologies reflected in their language and approach to symbolic meaning? (Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)	Who/what matters most to those who take up this position? What is the underlying assumption about justice in their position? (Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)
REMOVE monument removal and elimination				
REMOVE + remove to new, improved educational context				
REMAIN monument remaining in place, as is				
REMAIN + monument remaining in place with new, educational/descriptive context				

Figure 2. Chart students use to identify perspectives.

Where do you find your sympathies diverging from a particular group or decision? Identify the arguments, actions, and assumptions made about public memory that you feel should serve as a guide to how communities should deliberate and make decisions about the symbols they display and care for.

5) *Joint Essay Assignment*

6) *Post-Essay Completion Reflective Memo*

250 words, to be completed in-class before essay is submitted

What are you learning about how your beliefs and values shape what you think is socially just? In what ways might awareness of these things impact your understanding of your own beliefs and values? What are you learning about the aim of social justice in community problem-solving?

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.86>.

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